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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KRIM](#) [PHUM](#) [BU](#)
SUBJECT: MUSLIM LEADER REGAINS LEGITIMACY, REINFORCES
IDEOLOGICAL MONOPOLY

Classified By: Jim Bigus for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) Summary. As expected, in a national conference convened by more than 3,000 Bulgarian Muslims and sanctioned by the court, Mustafa Alish Hadji won re-election as Chief Mufti. Most of the Muslim community, weary of a decade-long leadership struggle, welcomed Hadji's victory. Community leaders say the ongoing dispute, instigated by former (Communist-era) Chief Mufti Nedim Gendzhev, has distracted them from serving and educating their followers and threatens to weaken Bulgaria's tradition of a largely secular, non-radicalized Muslim population. Decrying possible radicalization from foreign influence, the Mufti's office -- heavily backed by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) political party -- continues to show little tolerance for other Muslim groups that offer an alternative view of Islam. End Summary.

BACKGROUND

12. (U) Bulgarian Muslims comprise the largest religious minority in Bulgaria, approximately 13 percent of the population of 7.6 million. Known for their moderate tradition, the majority of Bulgaria's Muslims are Sunni, with roughly 50,000 who identify as Shia. Islam is the predominant religion among the ethnic Turks, who are nominally represented in Bulgaria's coalition government, through the MRF. The issues facing Bulgaria's Muslims are most pressing in the Rhodope Mountains along the country's southern border with Greece, which are home to many Muslims, including ethnic Turks, Roma and "Pomaks" (ethnic Bulgarians who practice Islam).

13. (SBU) The shiny minarets of newly built or recently renovated mosques easily attract a visitor's attention in the modest villages throughout the Rhodope Mountains. Local clerics typically maintain these were built with support from the community, but some admit to receiving foreign donations, mostly from the Arab world, reportedly with no strings.

14. (SBU) The MRF's economic influence in the Rhodope Mountains is clear as well. In private conversations contacts (sometimes reluctantly) share examples of MRF's successful tactics to keep the clergy beholden by securing employment. Typically, for instance, a village mayor will have served as the local imam before being elected on the MRF ticket. The party is infamous for its corruption and non-responsiveness to the social needs of poorer constituents, but maintains strong influence and control in the region by distributing jobs and wealth. The political-religious nexus is not as obvious among Pomaks, although MRF has lately made an effort to broaden its target group beyond self-identified ethnic Turks.

LEADERSHIP DISPUTE

¶5. (U) The 3000-plus Muslim delegates from around the country re-elected Mustafa Alish Hadji as Chief Mufti on April 19. Hadji's victory came as no surprise. Many Muslims, particularly in rural areas, have focused little on the leadership dispute, but its outcome impacts key issues like the appointment of local clerics and the financial management of local religious institutions. Hadji received congratulations from President Parvanov and other Bulgarian officials, and was applauded by most of the largely secular Muslim community. He is generally viewed as an educated and moderate religious leader. An ethnic Bulgarian Muslim who has been serving as Chief Mufti since May 2005, his image is as a uniting figure for Muslims and an acceptable choice for non-Muslims.

¶6. (U) The April conference followed a December, 2007 Supreme Court of Appeals' decision annulling a prior Hadji win. That ruling had effectively reinstated Nedim Gendzhev, who had contested Hadji's election. Gendzhev is a former Chief Mufti from the Communist era with a decidedly dubious record and limited support within the Muslim community. He has consistently exploited legal loopholes in his quest to regain control over the Muslim community and the property that belongs to it. He has also been linked with the Communist State Security Services and is known for his close ties with Muslim leaders from the Arab world.

¶7. (U) Fearing Gendzhev's connections and resenting his effective legal haggling, the Muslim community collected more than 1,000 signatures demanding that the Sofia City Court convene an April conference. Many worried that Gendzhev would misuse or steal the community's properties. In the past he had managed to either sell or rent some of them

(including a lucrative hotel in Ruse) to his relatives. Most of the properties confiscated during Communist times have been reclaimed, with one notable exception -- the Museum building in Kurdjali. The Chief Mufti's office collects the funds generated by these properties and distributes them to regional muftis, Bulgaria's three Islamic schools and the Islamic Higher Institute in Sofia. The lack of legitimate leadership has hampered the office's administration.

¶8. (SBU) Gendzhev, for his part, has alleged that Hadji is a pawn of the predominantly ethnic-Turkish political party and junior coalition partner MRF, which he says politicizes religion to help secure control over its electorate. Gendzhev reiterated this claim immediately after the conference, also asserting that a key court official was bribed BGN 300,000 to schedule it. While Gendzhev's latest attempt to challenge the leadership has been rejected, the common belief is that he won't give in. Both community members and academics comment that he is more a businessman than a cleric. They dismiss his accusations that the Chief Mufti's office has failed to prevent invasion of radical elements, particularly in the rural mountain villages, and that such elements have started illegal Muslim schools.

MUFTI'S RELATIONSHIP WITH MUSLIM NGOS

¶9. (SBU) Muslim leaders close to Hadji insist this long-running dispute has distracted them from serving and educating their followers, which many believe is critical for ensuring a continued non-radicalized Muslim population here. Sporadic press reports about the distribution of Islamic extremist propaganda heighten concerns. The Mufti's office has suppressed non-profit organizations and alternative Muslim groups, believing that disparate views of Islam will confuse the population and give rise to radicalism. Academics note that Muslims returning from studying overseas are often more observant, bringing new worship practices and clashing with a community that is both secular-leaning and strongly suspicious of foreign influences.

¶10. (SBU) The Union of Muslims, a mainly Pomak organization

that aims to present an alternative voice to the MRF, has a fragile partnership with the Chief Mufti's office. Under Bulgarian law, NGOs operating within a certain religious community must be formally recognized by that religious group's leadership. Union of Muslims Chief Secretary Salih Arshinski told us the group has been under suspicion ever since one of its leaders, a former Regional Mufti of Sofia, was arrested in 2006 for allegedly publishing extreme views on a web site. Even though charges were ultimately dropped, the arrest effectively discredited the organization, which is still maintaining a low profile.

¶11. (C) Arshinski criticized the government's purported efforts to fight radicalization, noting the government's vulnerability to corruption, which could allow a radical group to pay for acceptance. He carefully distanced his organization from another Muslim NGO, the Union for Islamic Development and Culture, which had its court registration recently revoked on charges of engaging in religious activity. The group, headed by a graduate of religious university in Jordan, was suspected of ties with radical Arab foundations.

AHMADIYYA MUSLIM COMMUNITY

¶12. (SBU) The Chief Mufti's office has twice (in 2005 and again in 2007) blocked the registration of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community -- the Ahmadis -- as a state-recognized religious group by advising the Religious Directorate such registration would promote a non-traditional interpretation of Islam in Bulgaria. Although the Ahmadis claim to be Muslims, the Chief Mufti's office refuses to recognize them as Muslim because they claim their founder, Hadhart Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, is a Promised Messiah and Madhi. Founded in Punjab, India at the end of the 19th century, the Ahmadis have grown to claim "tens of thousands" of members in 189 countries worldwide, including some 1,000 believers in Bulgaria. The Ahmadis here describe the Chief Mufti's office as their greatest enemy. They say it has misrepresented the Ahmadis' religious practices and falsely claimed that Ahmadis do not go on hajj or pray toward Mecca.

¶13. (SBU) After the rejection of their registration as a religious group, the Ahmadis operated as an NGO, which further fueled Bulgarian authorities' suspicions. Ahmadis report that they pray in their homes and help young children and the needy. They recently donated 3,000 leva each to two orphanages, with funds reportedly received from their

headquarters office in London. In early 2008, officials in the city of Blagoevgrad cancelled the Ahmadis' NGO registration, charging that the group practiced religion in public places. The Ahmadis say they want their rights enforced via the law and not through violence, and are considering taking their case to the European Court of Human Rights.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) The April conference appears to have resolved a long and administratively exhausting legal dispute over the leadership of Bulgaria's Muslim community. The Mufti's office, lead by a widely recognized moderate religious educator with strong ties to Turkey, is now able to focus on the community's concerns, including fears of foreign influences. With close ties to the MRF, the Mufti's office remains open to criticism that by squelching the activity of alternative groups it is protecting the MRF's dominant position and cultivating advantages for the party's traditional patrons, clients and followers.
Karagiannis